

Sri Lankan journalist shot by gunmen

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18 February 2013

Sri Lankan journalist Faraz Shauketaly, who works for the English-language *Sunday Leader*, was shot on Friday night by unidentified gunmen at his residence in Mount Lavinia, on the outskirts of Colombo. This is the latest in a series of violent attacks on journalists and media employees since President Mahinda Rajapakse came to office in 2005.

The assailants were clearly trying to kill Shauketaly, but they failed. He was shot in the neck and is being treated in the intensive care unit at the Colombo National Hospital. He underwent surgery to remove the bullet, and hospital director Anil Jasinghe described his condition as stable.

Shauketaly is a dual British-Sri Lankan citizen. The gunmen stormed into his house while he was in a phone conversation with a colleague about an article. Several acquaintances who had been staying at his house rushed Shauketaly to hospital. In recent days, he had told several of his fellow journalists that he had received death threats over the phone.

Sakunthala Perera, the *Sunday Leader* editor, told the *World Socialist Web Site* that Shauketaly wrote investigative articles on corruption in the public and private sector. He had recently written several articles on corruption in coal power projects in Sri Lanka. "This type of attacks violates our freedom of writing," she said. "The lack of genuine and speedy investigation hinders our work further."

President Rajapakse announced on Saturday that he had ordered police chief N.K. Illangakoon to conduct an "immediate investigation" into the shooting. The announcement is purely window-dressing. Rajapakse has made the same order after virtually every attack, but none of those responsible has ever been apprehended.

Comments by police spokesman Prishantha Jayakody make clear that this inquiry will be no different. "Investigators have still not been able to make any headway. We are probing all aspects of the case," he said.

Several media rights organisations, including Sri Lanka's Editors' Guild, the Free Media Movement and South Asia Free Media Association, have condemned the

attack on Shauketaly.

There has been a long history of acts of violence including killings and "disappearances" carried out by pro-government thugs and militias, acting in collusion with the security forces. Among the targets have been media workers and journalists who have made even mild criticisms of Rajapakse, government leaders or top officials.

On February 7, unidentified thugs grabbed bundles of the Tamil language newspaper, *Thinakkural*, which is published in Jaffna, and burned them. Several weeks ago, *Uthayan*, another Tamil language newspaper, was similarly attacked. Both papers have been critical of the Colombo government.

The *Sunday Leader* is well known for its criticisms of the Rajapakse regime and expressed the concerns of sections of the ruling elite over its renewal of the civil war against separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2006. The LTTE was defeated in May 2009.

The *Sunday Leader* has been repeatedly attacked. In November 2007, its printing press was gutted. In January 2009, former editor Lasantha Wickrematunge was murdered in broad daylight as he was driving to work. Despite the heavy security presence in Colombo, his killers escaped and were never found by police.

In a *Sunday Leader* editorial written in advance and published posthumously, Wickrematunge blamed Rajapakse for his death. "In the wake of my death I know you [Rajapakse] will make all the usual sanctimonious noises and call upon the police to hold a swift and thorough inquiry," he wrote. "But like all the inquiries you have ordered in the past, nothing will come of this one too."

In 2008, Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse, the president's brother, filed a defamation case against the paper for publishing an article exposing corruption in a defence deal. The court last year ruled in favour of the defence secretary and ordered the *Leader* publishers pay him 250 million rupees (\$US2 million). It also issued a permanent order preventing the paper from publishing any

further article that could be defamatory of Rajapakse.

Facing these heavy penalties, the *Leader* publishing company was taken over last year by a person close to the government. Its former editor Federica Janz was sacked after she refused to stop criticising the government. Janz left the country in September fearing for her life, as she had been previously threatened by Defence Secretary Rajapakse and pro-government thugs.

Since 1999, 25 media workers, including journalists, have been killed in Sri Lanka, many since Rajapakse came to power. Several journalists, including *lanka3news.com* editor Pradeep Ekneligoda, have been “disappeared”. Over the same period, 20 journalists have fled the country fearing for their lives.

Access to five web sites critical of the government has been blocked by the authorities. Last year, citing national security, the government blocked a freedom of information bill that would have given limited public access to government documents. The government fears such a measure could help expose its human rights violations and responsibility for war crimes.

New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists has characterised Sri Lanka as “highly restrictive and dangerous nation for the press.” Last month, Reporters Without Borders placed Sri Lanka at 162 out of 179 in its Press Freedom Index.

Confronting a deepening economic and social crisis, the government is seeking to intimidate and suppress any opposition or criticism of its rule. Rajapakse is strengthening the police state apparatus that was built up in decades of civil war for use against the working class as he implements harsh IMF-dictated austerity measures that have already led to a serious deterioration of living standards.



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